

faded from memory because the spirit of revolution—a new spirit, and the spirit of beginning something new—failed to find its appropriate institution. There is nothing that could compensate for this failure or prevent it from becoming final, except memory and recollection” (1963: 280). To this end, the book’s last chapter, “The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasure,” was a long and passionate call for social renewal through revolution and “participatory democracy,” an ideal and a phrase that would reverberate throughout the 1960s.

Another source of inspiration was her passionate personalization of politics. In *The Human Condition*, she had defined politics as a form of collective self-disclosure, in which people revealed themselves through public action. As she herself revealed in the controversy surrounding her “Reflections on Little Rock,” she based political judgment on an ability to place oneself in the position of an actor. Although she developed these ideas through historical and philosophical analysis, not in direct political activity, her thoughts contributed, against her own will perhaps, to one of the central themes of the new politics of the 1960s: the personal is political. In direct confrontation with activists, she argued vehemently against feminists, who in her view conflated the private and public domains of intimacy and action, just as she had argued against Negro parents, who in her view confused social and political aims. However, Arendt’s reflections on personal political judgment and the importance of symbolic public acts became extremely influential in the new social movements.

Arendt’s notion of society as collective disclosure added an important communicative dimension to what had traditionally been conceived of as a domain of self-interest. Her work linked two domains that had been kept separate in modern social theory: culture and politics. More important, in its own context her work provided a way of thinking about politics, as a sphere of meaning and symbolic action, that would inspire new political actors as well as new political acts.

Erich Fromm and the Individual in Mass Society

The last thing, it seemed, that Americans wanted to think about in the 1950s was conflict. After the hot wars in Europe and Korea and

the cold war with the Soviet Union, the national mood was to turn inward. International conflict was to be avoided, and domestically the theme was peace on the labor market to get on with making up for the lost time and opportunity of the war years. In the academic world, the ideals of harmony and integration reigned supreme, just as long as one pledged loyalty to the flag and took part in the anti-Communist crusade. Parsons had published an enormous work on the structure of social action in 1937 in which he developed the outlines for a new perspective on society, a structural functionalism in which the various social institutions all served to ensure consensus and equilibrium. In this world where harmony of interest prevailed, conflict was seen as something abnormal and deviant, a social dysfunction, rather than the normal state of affairs, as Marx and other theorists of capitalist society had earlier claimed. In the real world of politics and in the theorized world of academic social science, the key word was “equilibrium,” and the search was for consensus rather than contradiction.

Impulses against this mainstream came from Europe as well as from academic outlaws like Mills. In a way not lacking in paradox, Europe, the site of the last great conflict, sent émigré intellectuals to America in search of peace, yet bringing a social theory in which conflict was the core idea. Erich Fromm was one such émigré, perhaps the most influential of all in popularizing the insights of Marx and Freud for a mass audience, making accessible the teachings of the two major prophets of social and interpersonal tension. As a practicing psychoanalyst, Fromm focused on the inner conflicts of the individual psyche; as a Marxist, he located a prime source of conflict in the class struggles of modern capitalist society; as a social critic who sought to combine Freudian and Marxian insights, he focused on the disturbing effects of conflict-laden mass society on the development of the individual. With this perspective, Fromm added a psychological dimension to the reconceptualization of society, thus implanting a dimension that would prove to be extremely important to the social movements of the 1960s.

Fromm was born in Frankfurt in 1900 to a wealthy, deeply religious Jewish family. Unlike the assimilated environment in which Arendt grew up, Fromm was saturated in Jewish tradition. As a teenager he was greatly attracted to messianism, and in his twenties he was



From Andrew Jamison at Ron Eyerman, *Seeds of the Sixties*
U. California, 1994
Press

one of a group of Jewish intellectuals (including Leo Lowenthal, Siegfried Kracauer, and Martin Buber) who organized an academy for the study of Jewish thought. This background would be crucial to Fromm's later social theory. While he would leave orthodoxy behind, he would never give up a religious orientation in trying to make sense of the relations between the individual and society. The basic idea that Fromm developed out of his religious orientation was that human nature was the product of an interaction between man and his environment as well as between human beings themselves. In the political mode in which he was to reconceptualize this idea, Fromm interpreted such interaction in terms of conflicts and as occurring in this world and not above or beyond it. As opposed to others attracted to psychoanalysis at the time, Fromm came to the field through sociology and philosophy, not medicine, having received his Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg in 1927, with a dissertation entitled "The Sociology of Jewish Law," written under the direction of Alfred Weber, a cultural sociologist and the brother of Max Weber.

In the late 1920s, Fromm joined up with other like-minded social critics at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, and there his interest in the conflicts between the individual and society took on a more concrete, as well as political, direction. Under the direction of Horkheimer, Fromm conducted a series of empirical investigations on the "formation of class consciousness." His research was quite different from anything that had ever been done before. What previous Marxian-inspired political activists had given little attention to became the focus of the Frankfurt concern: the subjective side of politics. Fromm and his colleagues wanted to know why the German working class had largely failed in its attempts to take over German society. The failure of working-class revolutions in Germany and Hungary ten years earlier, when popular support for revolts led by small cadres of activists did not materialize, raised important questions for Marxist theory. Class consciousness, the awareness of common exploitation and common interest among the exploited, was now seen as problematic. It could no longer be taken for granted as a function of social position. For Fromm, an important medium in the formation of consciousness was the family, which was an important source of an individual's character structure. This insight into the importance of the family in

the formation of consciousness was the direct result of the use of Freudian theory in political analysis. And in this Erich Fromm was a pioneer.

In 1929, Fromm carried out a study of the political beliefs and psychic structure of blue- and white-collar workers in Germany, as a way of providing scientific grounding for political practice. Fromm and his co-workers sent out a questionnaire with 271 questions to 3,300 persons; of these, they received more than 1,000 replies. When interpreted through the analytic framework provided by a synthesis of Freud and Marx, the results called into question the "truth" they sought to test: even some of the most "objectively" revolutionary workers, members of both the working class and left-wing political parties, revealed a strikingly nonrevolutionary, "authoritarian" set of attitudes in areas traditionally regarded as nonpolitical, such as child rearing and women's fashion. The Freudian-Marxist framework allowed Fromm not only to explore these working-class attitudes but also to argue for their political significance. Fromm argued that "character structure" was the underlying foundation of psychological identity and thus the prime factor in consciousness and that it affected and was affected by family life and interpersonal relations, as much as by the relations of production, in the classical Marxian formulation.

For Fromm the ground of individual experience, the filter through which an individual interprets and constructs her reality, is character structure. It unified all the contradictory needs, desires, and impressions of everyday human experience. In a class society, one that is both hierarchical and contradictory, a particular character structure was formed in which these hierarchical and contradictory conditions were embodied. Character structures, according to Fromm, were class-specific and not universal, as Freud thought. The medium for the formation of an individual's character structure in Fromm's account as well as Freud's was the family. Here again, however, Fromm incorporated Marxian insights about the historical and class-specific nature of social institutions when he described the family as a set of social practices that vary within the social class hierarchy, thus producing particular class-related character structures. The nearly universal condition that did connect the historically specific family practices was male domination and authoritarian family relations.

In explaining the behavior of the German working class, Fromm pointed to the necessity to distinguish between those who merely supported and those who really believed in the Nazi movement. The problem, as Fromm saw it, was in interpreting the indifference expressed by the majority of the workers to the obvious threat that Nazism represented to their organizations and their way of life. His explanation of why the workers did not actively resist the Nazis was given in *Escape from Freedom* (1941). Here he argued that the answer lay not in the traditional appeal to false consciousness, that is, in an inability to perceive real interests, but in a loss of will. "By the beginning of the 1930s the fruits of its [the German working class] initial victories were almost completely destroyed and the result was a deep feeling of resignation, of disbelief in their leaders, of doubt about any kind of political organization and political activity. They still remained members of their respective parties and, consciously, continued to believe in their political doctrines; but deep within themselves many had given up any hope in the effectiveness of political action" (181). The explanation for this essentially psychological failure was thus historical and political: the German working class had suffered too many defeats. As a class, German workers knew where their interests were, but as individuals, they were no longer willing to fight for them.

In this and later analyses of Fascist movements, Fromm described the authoritarian character structure as containing the contradictory need both to dominate and to be dominated, a combination of sadistic and masochistic tendencies. Out of the political turmoil of the Weimar period, the Nazi social hierarchy was constructed so as to allow each person a social position from which he could dominate another and himself be dominated; the contradictory desires of the authoritarian character structure found their expression. Fromm was careful to point out, however, that he did not see the psychological conditions he described as the causes of Nazism; rather, they "constituted its human basis without which it could not have developed" (188). The type of false consciousness produced by this character structure made it impossible for members of the lower middle class or workers who typified it to distinguish more emotionally rooted short-term interests from longer-term economic or political interests.

As a consequence, these individuals and groups became the prey of political forces that would eventually destroy them.

The results of Fromm's path-breaking early work were not published in English until the 1980s. But they were not lost to either his early Frankfurt school colleagues or his own later work. *The Working Class in Weimar Germany* (1984) formed the model for later institute studies on the "authoritarian family" and the famous American study, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Fromm continued his interest in character structure and the psychological dimension of consciousness formation, as well as the wider problem of the interaction between individual formation and social setting, even after he moved to the United States in 1934, to help establish the Institute of Social Research in exile. In part because of internal conflicts within the exile community, the Frankfurt institute set up its headquarters in New York at Columbia University and not the New School for Social Research. While key members of the institute, Horkheimer and Adorno, lectured at Columbia, Fromm lectured at the New School, where psychoanalysis and cultural criticism were more in vogue and where his subject-oriented political theory was more acceptable.

From our perspective, one of Fromm's most influential books was *The Sane Society* (1955). Here Fromm asked the provocative question of whether an entire society can be unhealthy. The very question, as he stated in an early chapter, would be impossible to ask within the mainstream sociology of the time. "To speak of a whole society as lacking in mental health implies a controversial assumption contrary to the position of sociological relativism held by most social scientists today. They postulate that each society is normal inasmuch as it functions, and that pathology can be defined only in terms of the individual's lack of adjustment to the ways of life in his society" (1955: 12). Contrary to this sociological relativism, Fromm described his own position as "normative humanism," which argued that there were indeed universal criteria for mental health. Here again, Fromm drew on his Freudian-Marxian theory of human nature as the outcome of a conflict between individual psychological characteristics and social conditions, to develop criteria for mental health that could be used as a basis for criticism of contemporary American society. From his theory of human nature developed in his early work on the German working class, Fromm

argued that modern social conditions hindered and distorted basic human needs. As he wrote in *Escape from Freedom*, "While it is true that man is molded by the necessities of the economic and social structure of society, he is not infinitely adaptable. Not only are there certain psychological needs that imperatively call for satisfaction, but there are also certain psychological qualities inherent in man that need to be satisfied and that result in certain reactions if they are frustrated" (1941: 315). Mass society, Fromm argued in 1955, denied the inherent human need for creative and productive work by turning man into a cog in a great machine of his own creation. Mass society turned man into a commodity like any other, where "his value as person lies in his salability, not his human qualities of love, reason, or his artistic capacities" (1955: 356). In mass society, man becomes alienated from himself, from his own human nature. From this viewpoint, it is not a sane society.

With the great transformations it brought about in the way of producing the necessities of life and in the forms of private and public life it encouraged, the new mass society, Fromm suggested, fostered new personality types. David Reisman, a patient in Fromm's psychoanalytic practice and close follower of his thinking, wrote *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), the first popular academic book to attempt to map out these changes. Beginning with Fromm's assumption that societies tend to produce the individual personality types they require so as to be able to reproduce themselves, Reisman offered a character typology of mass society. In what would soon become catchwords for almost every educated person, Reisman mapped the shift from traditional to early industrial to modern mass society as the shift from tradition-directed to "inner-directed" to "other-directed" character structure.

Fromm elaborated on similar themes in *The Sane Society* and in later works like *The Art of Loving* (1956), which is curiously deceptive in its accessible and friendly tone; even today, however, it retains its power as a critique of American values. Written in the format of a self-help manual, the cover of the 1970 paperback edition proclaims "The world-famous psychoanalyst's daring prescription for love." Here Fromm reveals not only his writing skill but also his penchant for turning social criticism into language everyone can understand. It was this very capacity and the paperback packaging of his criticism that

caused some, like Marcuse, to dismiss Fromm as a mere social reformer. The medium, after all, was the message. But anyone picking up Fromm's book off the supermarket or drugstore shelves and seriously reading it could not help but be moved by the power of his critique of contemporary society. Love was described as an art, one that required discipline and practice but that was nearly impossible to achieve in a modern, commercially dominated capitalist society, which turned everything, including the deepest of human emotions, into commodities to be bought and sold. The art of loving, presumably, would require the revolutionary transformation of American society. Not exactly the normal supermarket fare.

Supporting himself through his private practice as an analyst and by lecturing at the New School, Bennington College, and the University of Mexico, Fromm wrote books in a popular style for a mass audience. Like Mills and Arendt, he remained on the fringes of academic life and tried to continue to keep his political beliefs alive. No longer was it easy for outsiders to find their way into the academy or for ideas other than those approved by the professional community to be voiced in the classroom. It was not Joseph McCarthy alone who would police the universities in the 1950s; the academic profession was fast developing its own mechanisms for ensuring conformity. That conflict could have a positive function in society was not one of the approved ideas of the time. To rediscover this lost perspective, Fromm, like many other émigré scholars, reached back into European social theory. Through them the new social movements of the 1960s were provided with a rich field of radical ideas to harvest.

By addressing himself to serious topics in an easily accessible manner, Fromm introduced central themes of European social and psychological theory into American culture. His socialist humanism drew attention to the alienation and psychological distress that a competitive capitalist society brought about. Like Mills and Arendt, Fromm aimed at providing the educated American public—and perhaps especially those in the process of being educated—with insights into the conditions of its own existence, the human condition in mass society. Their books were widely read in the 1950s, often to the annoyance of professional colleagues, but the real effects of their work did not become visible until the next decade, when new social actors



were able to turn their isolated voices into new forms of collective political action.

. . .

C. Wright Mills, Hannah Arendt, and Erich Fromm can all be considered midwives of the new social movements that would erupt in the 1960s. Each in their own way transformed the legacies of the 1930s—and even before—and made radical social thought relevant to the conditions of the postwar era. In so doing, they provided categories that helped make the new mass society comprehensible. Opponents of the professionalism that swept through the intellectual world, they were freer than most of their colleagues to transform inherited modes of thought into a new critical framework. As outsiders, they could more easily resist the general celebration of America's new position in the world as well as the academic shift from collective to individual-oriented social theory. Trained in America's heartland, in the Midwest, Mills formulated his critique of mass society in the wider moral terms provided by the populism he learned in Texas. He infused populist pragmatism with an original view of the sociological mission. Arendt remained faithful to the classical German philosophy she carried to America even as she assimilated an American concern with individual rights and freedom. In the postwar context, she confronted the ideal picture America had of itself with the new reality. Starting from a very different standpoint, she arrived at conclusions similar to those of C. Wright Mills. But she refused to abdicate her personal philosophical autonomy. When radicalism arrived on the scene in the 1960s, Arendt remained aloof but, at the same time, passionately engaged, upholding independent political judgment and reaffirming an autonomous life of the mind. Her importance was in the power and eloquence with which she displayed that judgment and the individual strength she showed in confronting her opponents.

Trained as a psychotherapist, Fromm resisted the drift in his profession toward an exclusive focus on the individual. He insisted on a moral as well as a historical standpoint in interpreting the character structure and personality patterns in the new mass society. Individual adjustment to external stress was not his concern, as it was for most of his professional colleagues. His opposition to the main societal drift

and his professional marginality allowed him to keep alive a critical intellectual attitude in new surroundings. Like Mills and Arendt, Fromm's conception of the individual was that of a person actively involved in the critical process of constructing the conditions of his or her existence. His synthesis of Freudian and Marxian thought within a moral-humanist framework added a crucial psychological dimension to the social criticism of Mills and Arendt.

While their social criticism grew out of different intellectual traditions, Mills, Arendt, and Fromm shared the formative experience of the upheavals and the social movements of the 1930s. Out of this experience emerged a common perception of the role of the intellectual as partisan, as one who takes sides on the issues of the day and raises fundamental questions of human existence in dialogue with a knowing public. While the actual content of this public may have differed at the beginning of their lives, they never lost contact with a larger public, and all three came to direct their social criticism toward the mass American public. This was not simply a choice they made but rather a result of historical contingency. As Arendt wrote of her own intellectual development, history was not always a welcome intruder on her own theoretical meditations. Try as one might, one could not remain "above the world," especially in dark times. Participation in social movements—Zionist in Arendt's case, socialist in the case of Mills and Fromm—widened their perspective on the aims and goals of intellectual activity. An intellectual must be involved in society to be able to address the crucial issues of an age in an accessible language. Much as they might dislike the transformations they described, including the explosive growth and importance of the mass media, they actively sought to use these media to spread their message. It was a rare occasion when Mills, Arendt, or Fromm addressed purely professional concerns. All suffered the wrath of their more professionally oriented academic colleagues for this alleged popularization or "vulgarization" of science. In the choice between professionalization and popularization, which confronted all intellectuals in the 1950s and which in many ways characterized the age, they clearly chose the people.

